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PRELATES AS PART-TIME PARLIAMENTARIANS: THE ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION OF THE LORDS SPIRITUAL IN THE CONTEMPORARY HOUSE OF LORDS

Summary

As full-time Church of England diocesan bishops, the Lords Spiritual are necessarily very much part-time Parliamentarians. This presents them with challenges in terms of maintaining a presence, and demonstrating its legitimacy, in an increasingly 'professionalised' House of Lords. This article draws on original interviews to explore the factors which shape the Bishops' attendance and participation in the House of Lords. It suggests that although long-standing constraints on their attendance have persisted and indeed increased in recent decades, they have nonetheless found ways to maintain and increase their Parliamentary activity in the light of changes in the Church, Parliament and society.

Keywords

Bishops, Church of England, House of Lords, Lords Spiritual, Parliament

The position of the Lords Spiritual- the 26 senior bishops of the Church of England who sit in the House of Lords¹ -is anomalous. This is not only because even some supporters of the presence of 'faith' representatives in an unelected Upper House might question the automatic inclusion of dignitaries of just one Church from one of the United Kingdom's four nations. Since most hereditary peers departed in 1999, the Bishops are the last members of the Lords who are not there primarily because they have chosen to be so². Meanwhile, the transformation of the House to, in principle, a house of life peers has made it more active and self-confident (see for example Russell

¹ Until 1847 all the bishops and archbishops of the English dioceses sat in the Lords. As the number of dioceses began to grow in the nineteenth century, the Bishopric of Manchester Act 1847 capped the number of the Lords Spiritual at 26. There are now 42 dioceses in the Church of England, including two outside England- the Diocese of Sodor and Man, whose bishop sits and votes in the upper house of the Manx Tynwald, and the Diocese in Europe- whose bishops who are not eligible to sit in the Lords. s5 of the Bishops Act 1878 provides that the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, and the Bishops of London, Durham, and Winchester, always sit in the Lords, and the other Lords Spiritual are the 21 most senior English diocesan bishops in order of date of appointment as diocesans. In consequence of the opening of the episcopate to women from 2015, the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 provides that until 2025 vacancies among the Lords Spiritual will be filled by the senior female diocesan bishop outside the Lords, if there is one. Lords Spiritual remain in office until they cease to hold a qualifying bishopric: under the Ecclesiastical Offices (Age Limit) Measure 1975 they must retire from their sees, and therefore from the Lords, at the age of 70.

² Even the remaining hereditary peers, who are elected by their fellows, have by standing for election expressed a positive wish to be in the House.

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2013), and there is a more formal expectation that new peers will 'commit the time necessary to make an effective contribution' to its work (House of Lords Appointments Commission 2014). These changes present difficulties for the Lords Spiritual, who all have full-time responsibilities outside Parliament, as 'chief pastors' and 'principal ministers' of their dioceses (Church of England 1964/1969, C18). When they enter the Lords, these responsibilities are not reduced. Parliamentary work becomes another duty that has to be fitted in alongside the rest. Although few members of the Lords can be described as full-time legislators, it is therefore especially difficult for any Bishop to be more than a very part-time Parliamentarian.

This paper draws on a number of interviews, mainly with Lords Spiritual, to explore some of the ways in which Bishops are present in the contemporary House of Lords. The academic literature shows that Bishops' attendance and participation in the Lords has increased significantly over the past six decades. However, at the same time their roles overall have increasingly focussed on the diocesan rather than the national stage. We consider this apparent paradox and suggest that Bishops manage the tensions between their diocesan and national roles in different ways at different stages of their careers, and that the two elements may in fact nourish each other. Furthermore, Bishops have, especially in recent years, become aware of the need to justify their continued presence in the Lords by being seen to make an effective – but not decisive- contribution to the work of the House.

1 Methods

Two rounds of interviews were conducted between 2013 and 2015. In the first round, between November 2013 and March 2014, informants were selected for their experience of the working of the House of Lords. Face to face interviews were conducted with two (then) current Lords Spiritual (Barchester³ and Christminster), one former Lord Spiritual, (Elmham), and a senior lay official of the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Division

³ To preserve anonymity, informants are referred to here by the names of fictional or defunct sees. There is no connection between an informant's actual see and his pseudonym.

(OMPA). Barchester and Christminster had at that time served in the Lords for seven and nearly nine years respectively, while Elmham had served there for some 11 years before his retirement. Hansard indicated that all three had been comparatively frequent participants in debates. OMPA was selected because his post gave him close insights into the Parliamentary work of the Bishops. The second round of interviews, conducted in November 2015, was designed to broaden the range of data available. In this round, Hansard was used to identify Bishops who had participated comparatively infrequently in the Chamber, on the supposition that this might indicate a lower degree of commitment to the House (a supposition which, as we shall see, proved to be erroneous). Telephone interviews were conducted with two Bishops (Felpersham and Southminster) who were members of the House of about two and a half and two years' standing respectively, and a face to face interview was conducted with a third Bishop (Selsey) who had been a member for about 18 months. It was also desired to explore the experience of Bishops who were members of Committees within the House; this had been identified by first round informants as a form of participation which was not easy for Bishops to undertake. Selsey had recently joined a Select Committee, and a further face-to-face interview was conducted with a much more senior and active Lord Spiritual (Starbridge) who had Committee experience.

All the Bishops interviewed were male, since the first female Bishops did not enter the Lords until late 2015. Each interview was recorded on a digital voice recorder and after transcription a copy of the transcript was sent to the interviewee for comments or amendment. No amendments were in fact requested.

2 What does the literature tell us about Bishops' attendance at the Lords?

In the 1950s Bishops' attendance in the Lords was at a low level. In considering a House which had lost many of its powers but had yet to be reinvigorated by the introduction of life peerages, Archbishop Cyril Garbett (York 1953) noted that

...only a few [Bishops] make any attempt at regular attendance, though this is also true of the majority of Temporal Peers, more especially since the House lost much of its power (York 1953:98).

Specifically, Garbett suggested that the Bishops' attendance had been affected by two factors: their diminished importance in terms of party politics as compared to their eighteenth and nineteenth century predecessors⁴ and the greater importance which Bishops had come to attach to their diocesan roles, which had reduced the time and space available for Parliamentary work. This could be exacerbated by the distance of many sees from London and the relatively short notice at which Parliamentary business might be arranged.

Like Garbett, Drewry and Brock (1971), who presented a detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis of the activity of the Lords Spiritual in the 1960s, depicted a politically non-partisan bench whose participation in the House was limited by their diocesan duties and by Parliamentary timetabling. Attendance remained low: between 1963 and 1968, when the House sat for an average of 123 days per session, each Bishop had on average attended just over 10% of sitting days (calculated from Table 1, p 230). By 1979-1987 (average sitting days per session 134: calculated from House of Lords 2015b), each Bishop was on average attending for 12.2% of eligible sitting days, with a range from 2% to 51% (Bown 1994:107): they were, Bown suggested, seen by some of their temporal colleagues as 'visitors rather than contributors' to the House (1994:105). Shell (1992 and 2007) confirmed the picture that other commentators had given. He offered graphic illustrations of the effect of other commitments on Bishops' participation: for example, 19 Bishops voted on an amendment to the Shops Bill in 1986 because they had time to come on to the House from a meeting of the General Synod which had just finished nearby (1992:55). Partington and Bickley (2007) presented the by now familiar picture of Bishops who mostly took their Parliamentary work seriously but who would always prioritise diocesan commitments (2007:45), but attendance had increased: by 2004-2005 (63 sitting days: House of Lords 2015b), each Bishop was on average attending for

⁴ Medhurst & Moyser (1988: 91-92) offer a concise overview of the decline in the party political nature of episcopal appointments from about 1830 onwards

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over 18% of sitting days (2007:27). In 2010-12, average attendance was 19% (Russell 2013:109). This means that over 50 years the average attendance of Bishops in the Lords has more or less doubled in percentage terms. 2010-12 was an exceptionally long and busy session (293 sitting days: House of Lords 2015b) but this did not reduce the average percentage of days upon which Bishops attended.

3 What is the nature of Bishops' presence in the Lords?

3.1 The prayer rota

The primary means by which a minimal episcopal presence is assured in the Lords is the convention that ordinarily one of the Bishops reads the prayers which open each day's sitting (House of Lords 2013: 3.06) For many years a prayer duty rota, now co-ordinated by the Church of England's Parliamentary Unit, has operated. This was originally restricted to the 21 most junior Lords Spiritual, but the Bishops of London, Durham, and Winchester have recently decided to participate (Felpersham). Each Bishop is on duty for approximately two weeks every year (one week for London, Durham and Winchester): during those periods they may stay in London and will be expected to be present in debates, ready to make a contribution on any item of business 'on which there is...either a request for a Bishop to contribute or in which we feel that a Bishop ought to contribute' (Barchester).

The Church of England's Parliamentary Unit at Church House works with Bishops in preparation for their week on duty:

you will be requested by the Parliamentary Unit to look after the Church of England's interests in a certain number of debates... We're in phone correspondence [with the Unit] the week before, and email, and then we sit down with [one of its officers] at the beginning of the week and look at the week's business and plan it out accordingly (Southminster)

This entails a detailed look at forthcoming questions and debates to identify points at which a Bishop's contribution or presence might be desired. Even then speaking or attendance is ultimately at the Bishop's own discretion: *Parliamentary Affairs*, Volume 70, Issue 2, 1 April 2017, Pages 233–253, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsw013>

your principal responsibility is to lead prayers at the beginning of each sitting day, and then it's up to you really what you do... (Southminster)

but the tasks of maintaining a visible presence on the Bishops' Bench (Felpersham), and being ready to respond to business which might seem to warrant an episcopal presence or intervention (Starbridge) appear generally to be taken seriously.

3.2 Ad hoc attendance

Heavy demands on their time outside Parliament are common to all Lords Spiritual, and the duty system is shared by all except the two archbishops. Nonetheless, actual levels of participation and attendance do vary greatly, and appear always to have done so. Bishops are usually conscientious in their Parliamentary work (OMPA) and may see it as part of their wider ministry:

... trying to relate the Christian faith to wider culture and wider society. I mean, that's where I kind of operate, on the interface with the wider culture in all its dimensions, and the House of Lords was one other area where that side of the ministry could be expressed. (Elmham)

But there is no such thing as an 'identikit' Bishop and they have considerable discretion to decide their own priorities among the different elements of their work- including their Parliamentary duties. Some can make attendance a regular fixture in their diaries (Elmham, Selsey). More commonly, Bishops may combine attending the House with a visit to London on other business:

it's a question of making the most of time in London, really... [After a morning meeting elsewhere] I'd go over to the Lords and either have meetings with colleagues over there, because I knew they were coming, or go and have lunch with someone, and then go into the Chamber and stay in for the next part of the afternoon's business (Felpersham)

I'm down for General Synod in a couple of weeks' time, I'll go in then. But there I wouldn't so much be aiming to make a contribution unless there was something that was an area of particular interest or concern, I'd simply be looking to engage with the Lords and keep it in my mind and be visible (Southminster)

Although this kind of attendance can be valuable for getting to know, and be known in, the House, it has its limitations, especially in terms of being able to make a sustained contribution to legislation:

for the first six or eight months [in the Lords] I was often sitting there thinking 'what on earth am I doing here?'... I tried to go once a week to get a feel for the place but of course one found oneself sitting in on a debate which you didn't necessarily know very much about at all, hadn't really had time to prepare before coming, so couldn't really make a meaningful contribution or any contribution at all...(Selsey)

Even for more experienced Lords Spiritual

... keeping tabs on passage of Bills and legislation, going to all the meetings and discussions that lead to amendments and processes and committee reports is extremely difficult from a part-time position- almost impossible (Christminster).

3.3 Work outside the Chamber

Bown (1994: 105) noted that Bishops did not generally participate in Committee work. The Committees upon which they do serve tend to be ones where all groups within the House should be represented (for example, the Draft House of Lords Reform Bill Joint Committee in 2011-12, upon which the then Bishop of Leicester sat as Convenor of the Lords Spiritual⁵) or where some kind of expert 'moral' perspective is desired (as on the draft Modern Slavery Bill in the 2010 Parliament, when the Bishop of Derby sat on the Joint Committee; or the Communications

⁵ The Convenor of the Lords Spiritual: a senior bishop who has a loose role as co-ordinator (but not leader) of the group, and acts as a point of contact with Parliamentary authorities, and others.

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Committee, which deals with broadcast media and has traditionally included a Bishop). In these cases, the Committee Chair may approach the Parliamentary Unit or a senior Bishop to identify a Bishop who might be willing to participate (Starbridge, Selsey).

Bown attributed the limited participation of Lords Spiritual in Committees to the pressure of their other duties. For a diocesan Bishop, the level of commitment required by, say, a detailed scrutiny of a major Bill can be hard to sustain for long, and there is perhaps some reluctance to undertake it. In the 2015 Parliament, of 32 principal committees, only three- the Administration and Works Committee, the Communications Committee, and the Committee on Sexual Violence in Conflict- currently have episcopal members (House of Lords 2015a) But for some Bishops, committee membership can offer a degree of fulfilment and of structure in their Parliamentary work. A select committee which meets once a week over a number of years makes less intensive demands; there is no expectation that every member will attend every meeting (Starbridge) and the regular meetings can be fitted into a Bishop's diary well in advance:

...being in the committee is ... a big commitment of time each week... but ... it's every Tuesday for the next so many years...so you can just block it out of the diary... (Selsey)

For Selsey, the Committee established a regular pattern of his attendance at the House. Tuesdays became 'my Lords day': a train to London, arrival at the Lords at lunchtime, perhaps one or two meetings, and then a session of the committee in the afternoon. Committee membership had given his work in the Lords not only stability and predictability, but clarity of purpose and a greater opportunity to contribute to the work of the House than was presented by the less structured work of the Chamber:

... being invited to go onto the select committee has made a massive difference to me personally, because now I have a very clear role, I'm very actively involved on a weekly basis, I'm contributing a lot, speaking a lot... I now see my Lords involvement as primarily being on that select committee. (Selsey)

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Committee membership also offers the opportunities to develop connections with other members of the House:

'you get to know people pretty well ... if you're meeting you know ten, twenty times whatever it is
(Starbridge).

For Bishops, whose capacity to become part of the House is limited by their diocesan duties, this can be especially valuable:

...I didn't feel I got to know very many people, except for the other Bishops, but now of course ...I'm getting to know [the Committee members] quite well. So that, again, feels good. (Selsey) This question of creating and maintaining networks of relationships in the House is an important one, and is intimately connected with participation not only in the work of the formal work of the House, but in its wider social life.

3.4 'Presence' and informal networking

It might be thought that the duty system, because it places Parliamentary work in a Bishop's diary and because it may require a Bishop to stay in London rather than his/her diocese for a period⁶, would provide opportunities for informal networking and the cultivation of relationships outside the Chamber. In the 1960s Mervyn Stockwood, Bishop of Southwark and an assiduous attender of the House, argued that

... the opportunities for the Church to influence events are as great in the unofficial meetings in the dining room and corridors as in the official meetings in the House itself (Stockwood 1968:34).

But in practice Bishops' opportunities for such meetings are limited by other demands on their time.

⁶ Bishops are required, by law, to reside in their dioceses. However, Canon C18 provides that a Bishop's residence in London 'during his [sic] attendance on the Parliament, or on the Court, or for the purpose of performing any other duties of his office', counts as residence in the diocese (Church of England 1964/1969).

So what Bishops aren't, experience has been, is part of the sort of political landscape, sitting around in bars, having conversations, because we're under this acute pressure that other peers are not I would have loved to become more part of the landscape, and I don't think there's an easy answer to that
(Christminster)

Nonetheless, informal networking was not seen as impossible:

one of the interesting facts of the Lords is the long table in the dining room, where you simply go, usually at lunchtime, and sit in the next place. So, so, yes, you get to know people, and you can do that on an informal basis (Barchester).

it's still possible to do something....I would do a certain amount of talking around the place, you know, not a huge amount, but a certain amount..... go in for a cup of tea on the long table, go into one of the places the other peers are for lunch, perhaps in early evening have a drink at the bar or something from time to time
(Elmham).

Importantly, presence of this kind was seen not merely as an agreeable and interesting by-product of membership of the House, but as a definite resource which could contribute to the work and legitimacy of the Lords Spiritual.

Very generally, it provided a perhaps rather intangible sense of 'the feel of the place':

... you don't have to overdo it, but a little bit of that is important... you don't get the feel of the place unless you do that, you need to do a little bit of it.... to get a sense of the place and who is here (Elmham)

But more specifically, the absence of the contacts, and thus the goodwill, which this kind of presence generated has been seen as making the Bishops' position more vulnerable should there ever be a serious proposal for their removal:

that part of the landscape thing, I think the experience has been a disappointment and so peers who don't necessarily have strong feelings, when push comes to shove will tend to say 'well I don't really know these people, I'm sure they're good people but I don't know them and I'm not going to expend anything' [on keeping them in the Lords](Christminster).

4 What factors affect Bishops' attendance in Parliament?

4.1 Tensions between Bishops' diocesan and Parliamentary roles

The need to manage the competing demands of their Parliamentary and their ecclesiastical duties is probably the main reason that Bishops attend the Lords less frequently than any other groups, and has a number of aspects which need to be considered here.

We have touched on the fact that while Chamber business in the Lords is usually announced at rather short notice, diocesan engagements are often scheduled months in advance (York 1953; OMPA, Elmham, Selsey) and always take priority (Partington & Bickley 2007). But more widely, there is a 'massive, massive tension' (Selsey) between the national and the diocesan roles of Bishops. This is a very broad subject but one of its proximate causes in this case is changes in how Bishops are appointed. Earlier in the twentieth century, potential to make a national contribution was more frequently a factor in episcopal appointments:

I've been doing some ... work... on the story of the diocese and its bishops...we had a bishop who was appointed here basically because he was into, in the twenties, into the whole issue of Prayer Book reform, and they wanted him, and [Barchester] happened to be vacant and they put him [here]! He didn't know anything about [Barchester], he didn't like being here... but that was why he was appointed. Now that doesn't happen now! (Barchester).

Nowadays bishops:

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...are appointed very specifically, with the diocese itself playing a significant part in the appointment, to be Bishop of, Blackburn. And yes, we would find our *raison d'être* in...Blackburn, and not in being 'a' bishop of the Church of England. (Barchester⁷)

While nominations to bishoprics are still made by the Crown on the advice of the Prime Minister, since the 1960s the Prime Minister's role in appointments has changed radically and is now largely restricted to passing on a name chosen by the Crown Nominations Commission⁸, almost half of whose members are elected representatives of the diocese in question. Although the Church's official guidance (Archbishops' Secretary for Appointments 2013) notes the national as well as the local role of a diocesan bishop, this does, as Barchester implies, mean that diocesan considerations will carry considerable weight.

Nonetheless it should not be thought that extradiocesan responsibilities- whether membership of the Lords or participation in other national or regional bodies, within and beyond the Church- are neglected. As we have seen, Bishops' average attendance at the Lords has slowly but steadily increased in recent decades. Our interviews suggest that patterns of presence vary not only between Bishops, but between different stages of an individual Bishop's career. Three of the Bishops in our second round of interviews- Felpersham, Selsey and Southminster- were selected on the supposition that their comparatively infrequent participation in debates in the Chamber might suggest that they attached comparatively little importance to their Parliamentary role. In fact, this was not so. All expected their involvement with the Lords to increase over time, assuming that the Lords Spiritual as a body continued to exist. However, all, as comparatively new diocesans, reported that the early years of diocesan ministry often require more attention to be given to the diocese. This may be especially the case where it is the Bishop's first episcopal appointment:

⁷ Who was not Bishop of Blackburn

⁸ Maer (2008) gives an overview of the most recent changes to the nominations process. *Parliamentary Affairs*, Volume 70, Issue 2, 1 April 2017, Pages 233–253, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsw013>

I think most bishops struggle with all the organisational stuff, I just dived straight into that... But ... the episcopal [pastoral and liturgical] stuff you simply have to learn by doing, you can't read up... so there's a lot to learn. (Felpersham).

But in any case, it takes time for a bishop to settle into a diocese, to get to know it and to become satisfied with its running (Starbridge). This need not greatly affect a Bishop's Parliamentary role: because most Bishops enter the Lords in order of seniority of appointment, by the time they are called to the House the settling in period may be largely over, giving them more time to devote to other duties. However, if several retirements happen to be close together, the wait will be shorter:

I think I knew when I went in that it was going to be a sharp learning curve, as indeed most aspects of being a Bishop are, but ... the length of time you're a Bishop before you go to the Lords varies enormously according to the turnover of Bishops at the particular time, and in my case it came very quickly because I became a Bishop just before a significant turnover (Southminster)

Almost inevitably, then, many Lords Spiritual do not play a large part in the formal work of the Lords- debates in the Chamber or Committee membership- in the earlier part of their time in the House.

But because a Lord Spiritual is not speaking in the House, it should not be assumed that he or she is not committed to his or her Parliamentary role. Felpersham, Selsey and Southminster all presented a picture of Bishops at a comparatively early and demanding stage in their present ministry conscientiously incorporating Parliamentary work into their other obligations, not only meeting the minimal requirements of prayer duty but familiarising themselves with the House and its ways with a view to participating more fully in its work in the future. Starbridge, who was a very active Lord Spiritual of long standing, reported a similar pattern in his earlier years:

...for the first five years [in the House] I was often taking it in and getting the measure of it, meeting people

while Southminster stated that

my observation of other Bishops ahead of me in the process is that ... people have a number of years when they concentrate on the diocese ... and then have years when they focus much more on the national scene

One explanation for the more frequent presence of contemporary Bishops in the Lords may be the increased number of suffragan and full-time assistant bishops- from 41 in 1947 to 68 in 1993 (Podmore 2008:73), and 70 in 2015, including, in some dioceses, Area Bishops to whom responsibility for running of parts of the diocese is delegated by the diocesan. Almost all diocesan Bishops now have at least one suffragan bishop to assist them in their dioceses, and most of our interviewees cited this as a factor which enabled them to take on extra-diocesan duties, including Parliamentary work. One interviewee bluntly attributed his ability to attend the House for a day every week to the fact that 'I had three Area Bishops that do the entire day by day practical work' (Elmham) and another explained a period of low attendance by a coincidence of vacancies among his Area Bishops:

... there are... three Area Bishops and there were ... two retirements, the third person was off sick for three for four months, so for a large part of [it] I was the only Bishop in the diocese, ...so everything, everything to do with national involvement had to be put seriously on hold (Selsey) .

But it may also be possible to identify the increase in Bishops' attendance at the Lords as one element of an increase in their activities overall:

Bishops are just getting busier (laughs). That's the only thing you can conclude from that, really (OMPA).

Although it might seem paradoxical, it may well be that Bishops' increased involvement with their dioceses has actually nourished their work in the Lords, and vice versa. Harlow, Cranmer and Doe (2008:502) found strong agreement among the Bishops who responded to their survey that their diocesan and Parliamentary roles were interdependent and complementary, with resources such as experience, knowledge, or contacts gained in the

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Lords, or the perceived additional status which derived from membership of the House, being seen as 'invaluable' to diocesan work. As Southminster explained:

people include me in conversations about things like [regional economic development]...the fact that I'm going to the [major local industry], I'm asking them questions... they're telling me, because I'm a member of the House of Lords I can then raise that in ... debate and then I write it up [for the regional newspaper] and say I mentioned this in the House of Lords. There's a synergy between all of that.... it really gives a bite to that, the fact that I have somewhere to take those concerns and bring them back in to the region.

A theme that has been increasingly present in work on the Lords Spiritual over the past 40 years, as well as in the terms in which they themselves describe their work, has been their 'constituency' role. Bishops emphasise that because of their link to their dioceses, they are 'the only members of the House of Lords who actually have, as it were, a constituency' (Barchester). 'The regional role is really significant' (Southminster- who stated that at one time he had been one of only two members of the House from a significant conurbation) and was taken very seriously by all our informants, especially as a means of giving a voice to areas that were not strongly represented in the House (Starbridge). The economic and social characteristics of a Bishop's diocese may well influence the subjects on which he or she speaks in the Lords (Selsey, Southminster) and more generally Bishops draw on- and believe that they are expected by other members of the House to draw on (Barchester)- experiences and illustrations from their dioceses to inform their contributions to debates. Viewing this 'constituency' representation as a bridge between national and diocesan roles perhaps helps us to understand how an increase in Bishops' diocesan activity has not caused a decline in their Parliamentary work.

4.2 Personal interest and inclination

Some Bishops clearly enjoy their membership of the Lords. It can be an attractive and 'flattering' (Southminster) experience:

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It's quite heady, by the time you've spent a week there as a duty Bishop and been called 'My Lord' from Monday to Friday, you know your head is bigger when you come out, really! (Southminster)

and can be a welcome contrast to other aspects of episcopal life:

I think I just enjoy it, and to some extent- I wouldn't want to emphasise this too much- it's not Church!

(Laughs) So much of my life is Church! It's actually a bit like playing tennis or keeping bees...(Starbridge).

It can offer opportunities to gain new experiences and knowledge, and to meet and debate with interesting people:

I temperamentally love new things, enjoy engaging in new experiences, and therefore, temperamentally, it suits me (Southminster)

I quite enjoy the cut and thrust of debate ... and I suppose the House of Lords provides that (Starbridge)

But other Bishops may simply never really feel comfortable there, especially in the Chamber. Bishops are by definition public figures, who should be accustomed to public speaking and membership of the Church's own legislative body, the General Synod, but the House of Lords may present something of a challenge :

it's a very demanding chamber to speak in because of the range of expertise (Southminster)

for quite a lot of Bishops it does require quite a big cultural shift to switch from a kind of Church context where they're trying to manage an organisation to a public forum where they're trying to relate to all manner of people, where there's a huge amount of talent and ability around (Elmham).

In a diocese, there is only one diocesan bishop and he or she is often deferred to. In the Lords, a Bishop is one member among over 750. Although in the House few formal distinctions are drawn between members (Crewe 2005: 106-109), it can be described by even a very active and experienced member as 'an intimidating place to speak' (Elmham), requiring from speakers a particular style and tone, so that

even people who are assured on every other occasion and are established and experienced speakers can feel quite intimidated in the House of Lords, so if a Bishop feels a bit shy or intimidated it's not at all surprising (Elmham).

4.3 Co-ordinating presence and keeping the balance

The Parliamentary Unit at Church House co-ordinates and encourages the attendance of Bishops at the Lords. It circulates a weekly bulletin

which tells us (a) what we've done and (b) what's coming up where we might like to contribute, and sometimes there will be a sort of...Lambeth thinks, or the Archbishop thinks, that we really ought to get behind this (Barchester).

and, as we have seen, helps Bishops to prepare for their weeks on duty.

But it is mistaken to think of the Bishops' voices and votes being marshalled or directed on behalf of the Church. All those interviewed for this paper were adamant that there is no 'Bishops' whip' in any meaningful sense. At one level this reflects the fact that '...the nature of the Bishops' role means that it's incredibly rare, almost impossible, to have them all there at once' (OMPA). At another, it reflects the legal and constitutional position: Bishops are

independent members of the bench and are all free to attend as frequently or as infrequently as they want to and to vote however they want to (OMPA)

Bishops

are not a bloc, they are not there to act as a sort of Anglican wedge. They aren't there as corporate representatives of the Church of England and they don't have a party line to follow (OMPA).

Individual Bishops will have their own personal and professional views on contentious subjects and these may differ markedly from the views of their colleagues; they may also be, in private, supporters of particular political parties, although they are usually scrupulous in not expressing a party allegiance in public (Starbridge). Any attempt at whipping would founder on these differences. Even on the few subjects (such as assisted dying) where the Church comes close to having an official 'line', there is nothing that can be done to prevent a Bishop breaking ranks- although 'if you're going to say something which is in direct defiance of current Church of England policy you need to be very aware of what you're doing' (Barchester).

But it appears that the absence of a 'whip' is also the product of a political judgement. Barchester went so far as to talk of there being actually 'a strong anti-whip ... which does not want too many of us be there on any one occasion' for fear of being thought to be 'packing' the benches. OMPA suggested that 'it wouldn't be desirable for [Bishops] to be all there...on a regular basis in any case'. The Bishops, and the Parliamentary Unit, seem to be very wary of doing anything that looks like they are acting as a bloc attempting to impose the Church's views on lay legislators. The Lords Spiritual today find themselves in a delicate position. Social, cultural and political changes over the last sixty years mean that it is much harder for them to assume that their right to sit in Parliament- in the first place, as members of an unelected House, and in the second place as dignitaries of an established Church to which formal individual adherence is declining (e.g. Natcen 2015) - will be broadly accepted. Experienced observers suggest that the House itself, with nearly 500 new members between 2000 and 2014 (Taylor 2014:5), has not been immune from wider social change:

there are still a hefty number of those in both Houses who I would call ... Anglicans with an instinctive understanding of Establishment [but] I think the numbers are probably thinning, as time goes on (OMPA)

I think the newer members of the Lords who come in recently find it a bit odd to see Bishops there... and there's a slightly greater awkwardness with some people, just with the fact that the Bishops are there. I

don't think that's manifesting itself in very awkward ways, but I sense it more than I did five-ten years ago, and my guess is that... when there is a substantial reform of the Lords you may well get the whole position of there being Bishops there re-opened (Starbridge)

Privately I think... there's about a third of members of the House of Lords who would have strong sympathies for the Bishops remaining... and there's about a third that would have strong antipathy, and about a third who don't think about it at all and might or might not be persuadable...and I think it's extremely difficult ... to know how those people are going to go (Christminster)

As a result, if the Bishops' position in Parliament is to continue to be acceptable, they have to tread carefully. On the one hand, they have to be seen to be contributing usefully to the work of the House:

there's no resting on establishment laurels (OMPA)

... we have to earn our place a bit more than we've done in the past (Christminster).

There does continue to be a substantial desire to hear Bishops' contributions, especially where debates are thought to raise particularly prominent moral or ethical questions:

on the whole the contributions from the Bishops' bench are well regarded...and senior members of the Government have said this to me, that this seems to be working quite well (Starbridge)

Indeed, Bishops are sometimes criticised for failing to contribute to debates. Southminster vividly described one such occasion when, as duty Bishop, he had to leave the Chamber before the debate began:

there's a passage in the ...Minister's summing up, in Hansard where they very much regret, in House of Lords language, that no Bishop was present or spoke in that debate...[a cross-bench peer] came into the

Bishops' Robing Room at the end of the debate...and said 'the Bishops got a right bollocking', and was really cross.

The creation of the Parliamentary Unit in 2007 can be seen in this context:

there was anecdotal feedback coming from a fairly large number of MPs and peers that the Church of England wasn't heard from on ... a lot of the issues they were having to look at and they wanted to hear a voice (OMPA)

and in recent years it has arranged induction sessions for new Lords Spiritual with groups of MPs and peers, at which the message from members of both Houses and all parties has been 'you [Bishops] have a voice, we listen to you, use your voice' (Southminster).

On the other hand, there is an awareness that too public and apparently heavy-handed an intervention, especially when it relates to matters in which the Church is seen to have a direct interest or on which Bishops are likely to take positions which go against a substantial body of secular or lay opinion, may attract criticism, particularly from those who are unsympathetic towards the Church and/or the House of Lords as institutions - as it did in the case of proposals to change the law on same-sex marriage and assisted dying. One Bishop later noted that 'the euthanasia stuff... I think we rather regretted in the end that there were so many of us there' (Barchester).

It is unsurprising that the Bishops should want to avoid being criticised either for doing too little in Parliament, or for doing too much (or indeed anything at all) there. However, regular proposals for Lords reform in recent years appear to have given an additional edge to the need to strike a balance

between issues which are about how does the Church ... play its hand in here in order not to... stimulate...initiatives which would remove us, and on the other hand how does the Church play its part in this House as a voice in the larger political debate without any regard to its own place in the proceedings....

And I'd rather we concentrated on the latter, but there's always a gravitational pull ... towards the procedural place of the Bishops and the consequences of particular actions on our...reputation and our capacity to see off any attempts to remove us... (Christminster).

...if you want to keep Bishops in the Lords, I think that if you don't use it you'll lose it ... But there is a need to be prepared to use without over-using and that's quite a fine balance (Starbridge)

In fact, almost all major proposals for Lords reform over the past 70 years have envisaged retaining some representation of the Bishops, albeit usually in reduced numbers and, more recently, within the context of a broader category of 'faith' representatives⁹ (Dorey & Kelso 2011; Smith 2003.) Nonetheless, at least some Bishops appear to be acutely aware that their continued presence in the Upper House cannot be taken for granted, and to recognise the tensions that are inherent in their position.

5 Conclusion

Many of the factors which shape contemporary Bishops' attendance and participation in the Lords –notably, the requirement to combine Parliamentary work with full-time episcopal duties – have been recognised since at least the 1950s (York 1953). But over time the working patterns of the Lords Spiritual have changed. Strikingly, Bishops' attendance at the Lords, while still low by the standards of all other groups, has almost doubled since the 1960s; yet at the same time, Bishops have come to be seen within the Church, and to be appointed, more and more as diocesan and less and less as 'national' figures. The explanation for this perhaps counterintuitive development may lie in an understanding of the interplay between the national and local roles. We have touched on the narrative of the Bishop in Parliament as a (geographical) 'constituency' representative, drawing on knowledge of local

⁹ One of the difficulties in extending representation to other faith groups is that with the exception of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, who are normally forbidden by canon law to take part in secular politics, and the [Orthodox] Jewish Chief Rabbi, most non-Anglican faith leaders only hold office for a limited period. More widely Smith (2003) argues that to identify the Lords Spiritual as 'faith' representatives is in fact to misunderstand the relationship of the Church of England with the Crown and Parliament.

communities and life developed through a position as a locally significant leader and voicing the concerns of those communities. This is a powerful narrative, held not only by Bishops but by many lay peers, which allows the Bishops to perform a representative role which is unique both in the Lords (because no lay peers have such an explicit geographical connection) and for their communities (as a politically nonpartisan voice in Parliament).

Moreover, Bishops are now keenly aware of the need to earn their place in a House which has been the subject of a constant discourse of reform, and in the wider context of a society in which the practice of organised Christianity (and Anglicanism) has been declining since the 1950s. This requires them to perform a very careful balancing act. On the one hand, they need to be seen to be contributing to the work of the House, so that they are not open to the charge that they are a colourful but irrelevant anachronism. On the other hand, they recognise that they must avoid being seen as unduly influencing legislation and public affairs in a way that might privilege the Church of England as an institution and/ or as attempting to impose the values and beliefs of a 'religious' minority on a decreasingly 'religious' society. They thus need to speak, but not too much; to be seen to be taking an interest but not to be imposing an agenda; to be visibly present, but not so much as to attract the questioning attention of reformers.

These developments raise further questions about matters such as the formal and informal networks within which the Lords Spiritual operate and the resources upon which they draw. But for the moment, we may conclude that while externally the Bishops may appear to be an anomalous remnant of the unreformed House of Lords, internally they are distinctly aware of changes in both the House and in wider society and have responded to those changes by becoming more active Parliamentarians. (6999 words)

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